

# *Greater Love Has No Man*

*John 15: 9-18*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Golden threads run through the accounts of Jesus' last night. Our Lord revealed his heart to his inner circle of disciples. He gave them words that would never wear out. For the rest of their years, indeed down through the rest of the centuries of the life of mankind, Jesus' words that final evening give us the very meaning of our lives. This morning we're lifting out one of these golden threads to see it shimmer in the light of our contemplation.

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." I want you to love. And the greatest expression of love is to lay down your life for someone else. And that is what I am about to do for you. So live this way, giving your lives to one another.

Suppose we asked a fiancé, "Would you step in front of a bullet for the woman who will become your wife?" We know he would reply without hesitation, "Of course." Would we give our lives for our children in a moment of peril? I knew a man in North Carolina who bore a huge indentation and scar in his head. His son had slipped while wading above the massive Linville Falls. The boy was quickly swept over the edge. Without hesitation, this father had leapt in to try to save his son, taking the hundred foot drop himself. The gesture was not a rational decision but an instinctual one: I'll give my life for you. Thankfully, they both lived.

But the question gets harder when we ask about the smaller deaths that love demands. Will you get up from watching the game if your wife needs help putting up a curtain rod? Will you scrub the toilets every Saturday morning without being asked and without complaining? Will you believe in your man and tell him so even after he has had a failure at work that costs you a vacation? These choices of love are little deaths, and they require sacrificial decisions from us.

I remember having to make a difficult but immediate decision on behalf of Alec Flynt, my friend and our former associate pastor of discipleship. It involved what happened when I turned around and saw Alec mouth a swear word, then push an airport security guard. Several years ago, we attended the conference of the

World Reformed Fellowship in Edinburgh. The day we were to fly home, a volcano in Iceland erupted, spewing ash into the skies above Europe. All planes were grounded. We were stuck in Scotland. I know. How great was that! But truth be known, the fun was mitigated by the uncertainty. We didn't know when we could get back. Alec had little children at home, and the earliest guaranteed flight was more than a month away. Plus, as much as we like each other, an extra seven days of two increasingly scruffy dudes hanging out was wearing a bit thin. Our patience, like our laundry, was running out.

We had made a friend at the US Airways counter at the airport. "Be here at dawn the first morning the airport opens," she said. "That will be your best chance." When the news finally came that flights could begin, we drove in the frosty dawn. We found our friend. She gave us standby tickets. "These will get you through security. Go to the gate and wait. I think I can get you on the first flight." We were two guys determined to get home to our families. I went through security, being sure I was as efficient and cooperative as possible. I turned around to see where Alec was in getting through. That's when I saw his face. I couldn't hear him, but I could read his lips. You don't say that to an airport security guard. Then he shoved the guard.

In that moment, time stood still as choices appeared before me. Alec was a fool. He was going to go to jail. But I was through security and there was a flight home with open seats and Rhonda waiting for me. If I turn around now, I'll miss this flight. Besides, if Alec is stupid enough to do that, then he should just rot in a Scottish jail. I can go home today if I keep walking. But. But I can't leave him. I've got to die to going home and get him out of trouble. I have to. I started back towards this tense scene. Then I saw the security guard laugh. And Alec laughed. And everything was fine. "What's going on!?" I grabbed him. "What did you do?" "Oh, that guy was messing with me! He told me, 'Sorry mate, big mistake, no flights leaving today.' That's when I swore. Then he said, 'Just teasing you, mate!' That's when I shoved him, and then we were both laughing." Evidently, Scottish airport security is a bit different than the TSA. We did make the flight, but for me, it had been an exercise in making a split second decision to lay down my trip home for my numbskull friend. It's just what had to be done.

The reality is that the grand gesture of dying for someone seldom occurs. But these little decisions to give up a piece of your life, or your desires, come round all the time. They are the very substance of love. Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.

Jesus knew what was coming. Like any other Jew in occupied Israel, he had seen the method of execution the Romans used to control the people. They nailed people up to die on crosses in very public places. It was a shameful, horrifying death that took all the fight and rebellion out of those who witnessed it. The symbolism of hanging on the cross became an emblem of the love Jesus the Son of God had for the world he came to save.

On the cross, Jesus' arms were stretched wide open. The Romans forced his body into a position that Jesus had already willingly offered: the opened-arm welcome of love. Jesus was God himself coming to us with open arms. He stretched out his embrace of sinners, outcasts, diseased, broken, compromised, oppressed and lost humanity. On the cross, they pinned him in the position he had freely assumed. God stretched out his arms to us.

Once nailed and tied to a Roman cross, you could not get off it. There was no running away. And there was no leaping down to try to fight for yourself. You were just there, arms pinned open, enduring until you could endure no more. Again, the symbolism is so strong. The open-armed Jesus on the cross took the position of love in which he could not go forward or backward. He just had to endure in love until it killed him. Scripture tells us he could have called legions of angels to save him. He could have run away to save himself. And then we would have been lost. We would have been left in our sin, under sentence of condemnation and death. But he chose to stay on the beams. Loving us to the end even as he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Suspended on the beams of the cross, Jesus' willingly entered the condition of not being able to go forward or backward, but simply remained with arms open in accepting, forgiving love. He would not force himself on us. He would not make us accept him. Instead, he allowed himself to be rejected by us. He took it. Loving us the whole way, he endured the agony of love that will not force itself on someone or withdraw into self-protection. He loved. He took our rejection. He loved. Until it killed him.

Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. This works out in our lives in all the ways we too are sent to the position of the cross. We get called into situations in relationships where we must endure with our arms open wide in love. We may not run away. We may not curse and reject in anger. We may not try to force ourselves. We stay suspended on the beams. Hearts and arms opened wide. Feeling

acutely the pain. Praying feverishly, “Father, forgive them.” Even as we wince under the blows of how others are rejecting us or ignoring us or leaving us.

Once I spoke with a man who was watching his marriage come to an end. It was not what he wanted and not at all what he had expected. She was gone. She had a phone number he couldn’t get and if he called at work, she wouldn’t talk. She was looking to someone else for support and intimacy. At the deepest level, he just couldn’t find her anymore.

But neither could he let her go. “This is my wife,” he said. “We took vows before all our friends and family. This is for life. I didn’t take those vows lightly.” He loved her still. She bore his name. But she had gone. And the more he sought her, the further removed she got. It was killing him, physically as well as spiritually.

As I looked at him, I felt so viscerally, “You’re on the cross. I feel you suspended on the beams. You can go neither forward nor back. You just have to endure this hell that has no solution.”

I didn’t expect that my words would be of much comfort in the moment, but hoped the connection would return to mind sometime in the future. I spoke some halting lines which I hoped he would hear like this: “I think you’re where Jesus was. He came to love us. He had a legitimate claim on us. He is our creator and he called us to himself. But we fled him. He could not force us and have us be free. On the cross he was suspended in agony by his love. Rejected by us, he nevertheless could not let us go. So he endured in love until it killed him. I know that may not help much now, but at least you know you have some company in this feeling.”

Parents may feel suspended on the cross when their children pass through adolescence. We rear our children with all the love and skill we have, then must in due course let them go to make their own way. And though our hearts break, we cannot but watch them as they stumble into the pain of mistakes that will make them men and women. How excruciating is the watching! They are our flesh and blood. We held them so long under the roof of our homes and hearts. We would gladly give our lives on their behalf. They bear our name and our genes. We have a claim of love on them. Yet to speak may drive them away. To rescue them may drive them deeper into danger. To offer advice may illicit the exact opposite result. How many mothers and fathers yearn after their children while they feel hung on the beams of love, unable to go forward or back? We endure the years of

rejection, the agony of the damage done, the pain of wrong choices all the while praying for the days of resurrection to come.

These feelings of being stretched and suspended in an agony of love may occur for every sensitive heart that looks upon the world and believes it was meant to be more. We know that things are not as they should be. Something better was intended and will come to be when the kingdom of God is at last fulfilled. But now, in the meantime, we are in the pain of the interim. Whatever form our particular burdens take, the dynamic is the same. Whether we ache as we walk the hallways littered with declining bodies now devoid of coherent minds or cry as we see the earth pillaged and pocked from our greed, whether our hearts break over what is done to the children or feel the confusion of a culture that grows noisier by the second, we know that life is meant to be different. Jesus knows. He has lived this suffering of love. And he will not let us, nor the world, go.

Even from the cross Jesus gave himself to us. His presence there can make all the difference in the trials we undergo and the love we are called to give in the midst of them. Thomas Torrance has written:

It is the same God who delivered up his Son for us on the Cross who will continue to care for us day by day, no matter what happens. The very same Love of God is able, now, and every day, to make everything work together for good--and he does it through the Cross, his divine sacrifice. The Cross means that God does not hold himself aloof from us. And so whatever may befall us, in grief or pain, or loss, we may take it to Calvary and let it feel the touch of God in the Cross, where the infinite sacrifice of the Father and of the Son are forever inseparably bound together.

Because the cross of Christ's agony is a gift to us, we may go there with our sorrows and pain. We bring our situations to the cross and let them feel the touch of God in the cross. When we find a connection point between the terrible, suspending pain of our trials and the cross of Christ, we see there God's touch. He takes our pain unto himself and tends it. He can redeem the situations of our lives so that, beyond hope, something good can come even of the worst situation.

In the dark, disturbing days, we taste a bit of the agony of love. We feel what it is to be suspended between unbearable options, unable to go forward or back. This suffering cannot be removed. It is our lot. But we may in the midst of it enter the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. We may go and touch the cross and feel the touch of God in it. In the cross our sins are forgiven. All our griefs are

borne. In the cross is the offering of God on our behalf. And you and I are not alone. In this moment, feel the touch of God in the cross and let your sufferings and sins be placed there. And above all, love.

For Jesus is still giving himself to us. He is still making something glorious out of the suffering and pain of this life. He is still enduring with us in the agony of love that waits for us to come round to his truth. Faith in this love of Jesus is what gives us the courage to go forth and love in the same way. As Paul said so succinctly, "I die daily" (I Cor. 15: 31). We have in Christ Jesus the strength to die to ourselves in love for others moment by moment, decision by decision, doing so in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to new life.